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This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Goldsmith, Ben](#)

(2015)

The chain reaction.

In Goldsmith, Ben, Ryan, Mark David, & Lealand, Geoff (Eds.) *Directory of World Cinema : Australia and New Zealand 2*.

Intellect Ltd., Bristol, pp. 184-186.

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Pre-publication draft of chapter in Ben Goldsmith, Mark David Ryan and Geoff Lealand (eds)
Directory of World Cinema: Australia and New Zealand 2, Bristol: Intellect, 2015

The Chain Reaction

Country of Origin: Australia

Studio/Production Company: Palm Beach Pictures

Director: Ian Barry

Producer: David Elfick

Screenwriter: Ian Barry

Director of Photography: Russell Boyd

Editor: Tim Wellburn

Art Director: Graham Walker

Duration: 92 minutes

Genre: Thriller

Cast: Steve Bisley, Arna-Maria Winchester, Ross Thompson, Ralph Cotterill, Hugh Keays-Byrne

Year: 1980

Synopsis

An earth tremor causes a spillage of nuclear waste at a remote disposal facility operated by the Western Atomic Longterm Dumping Organisation (WALDO). One scientist, Heinrich (Ross Thompson) is exposed to radiation. WALDO's on-site medical team tell him he has only three more days to live. Resisting their desire to 'monitor' him and prevent word of the spill leaking out, Heinrich escapes. Garage owner and former racing driver Larry Stilson (Steve Bisley) takes his wife Carmel (Arna-Maria Winchester) away to their weekender in the country. At night near the Stilsons' destination, Heinrich makes a telephone call to anti-nuclear activist Eagle (Hugh Keays-Byrne) urging him to spread word about the spill. Settling in to their country house for the night, the Stilsons are disturbed by the appearance of Heinrich at the window. Heinrich collapses. When he awakes, he has lost his memory. WALDO operatives arrive in the area to monitor the spill and prevent it being made public. On his way in to town to alert the police about his mysterious visitor, Larry is chased by men from WALDO, led by Gray (Ralph Cotterill). Gray has secured the cooperation of the police by telling the two local officers that terrorists are involved, and that national security is threatened. In town, Larry is arrested and thrown in to a police cell where he is quizzed by Gray. Eagle, who has made his way to the town under the guise of a pinball repairman, manufactures his own arrest in order to tell Larry about WALDO and their efforts to cover-up the spill. Gray and his team of men in white suits appear at the Stilsons' house to check radiation levels and monitor Heinrich. Larry escapes from police custody, crashing through a roadblock on his way back to the house. He is met by Gray, and discovers that he and Carmel have been contaminated. They are stripped naked and forcibly decontaminated, but manage to escape in Larry's souped-up car, taking the ailing Heinrich with them. Pursued by Gray, they again crash through the ineffective police roadblock and abandon their car (still containing the unfortunate Heinrich) just before Gray crashes into it. A television news helicopter appears overhead. Over a shot of water flowing from a dam, a public service announcement warns the public not to drink from the water supply or eat any perishable food due to the contamination.

Critique

Recounting the enthusiasm with which an audience of children greeted *The Chain Reaction* on its release in 1980, film critic Sandra Hall described the film as 'probably the world's first nuclear western' (Hall 1985, p.172). By this, Hall meant that despite its supposedly serious subject matter, the film rapidly and happily descends into the kind of knockabout two-dimensional genre fare that once was a staple of Saturdays at the movies. There are civic-minded goodies and sadistic baddies, a dying amnesiac, a shady corporation bent on covering up a potential catastrophe, two fast-paced car chases, regular doses of nudity, and plenty of bad jokes and (often unintentionally) laughable

dialogue. With its aspirations to genre and associations with *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979), the film was unusual for its time, preceding by several years the efflorescence of genre films in the 10BA period.

The Chain Reaction was Ian Barry's first film as writer and director. He had worked as a television editor in the early 1970s, before his first big break editing and sound editing the cult Australian film *Stone* (Sandy Harbutt, 1974). He has since worked extensively directing telemovies and television series, many in Queensland where Barry has become a leading member of the industry based on the Gold Coast. He has directed several other films since *The Chain Reaction*, mostly thrillers, often mixing American and Japanese actors and Australian locations: *Minnamurra* (1989), also known as *Wrangler*, a historical outback melodrama starring Jeff Fahey; *Crime Broker* (1993), a thriller starring Jacqueline Bisset and Masaya Kotô; *The Seventh Floor* (1994), a thriller starring Brooke Shields and Masaya Kotô; *Blackwater Trail* (1995), a psychological thriller starring Judd Nelson; *Joey* (1997), a children's film with Ed Begley Jr. and *Robo Warriors* (1997), a low-budget sci fi thriller made in the Philippines.

While *The Chain Reaction* is capably put together, the director's ambition was frustrated by the Australian Film Commission's last minute decision to cut the budget by almost one-third to \$450,000. The crew then experienced a series of misfortunes in the shoot, including several (unplanned) car crashes, a close encounter with a drunken local who drove his car through the set at speed four times, an outbreak of gastro, a hepatitis scare, and the director's fall from a semi-trailer. Coupled with the many night scenes at the remote location – Glen Davis, a former oil-shale mine and processing plant 200km north west of Sydney – the first-time director's difficulties in keeping to schedule were compounded, leading to the decision to pass responsibility for shooting the major stunts and car chase scenes to producer David Elfick and his old university friend and Associate Producer, *Mad Max* director George Miller. Miller and the car chase scenes were not the only connections to *Mad Max*. The two films also shared the actors Steve Bisley, Hugh Keays-Byrne, Roger Ward, and David Bracks (with Mel Gibson making a cameo appearance as a mechanic in Stilson's garage).

The film's themes of the risks of nuclear industry and the problems of waste disposal were topical at the time, just a year after both the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania, and the release of *The China Syndrome* (James Bridges, 1979) which, like *The Chain Reaction*, dealt with the cover-up of an accident at a nuclear facility. And the theme resonates today, as Australia prepares to expand uranium mining and begin exports to India while questions remain over responsibility for waste disposal.

In the film, however, the theme is clumsily handled, and the viewer who attempts to follow the story is left with many unanswered questions. Performances are mixed: Bisley's impassioned displays of shirtless machismo and extraordinary hair are markers of their time; Ross Thompson seems to have modelled his expressions and accent on Klaus Kinski; while Keays-Byrne is difficult to take seriously in a role that makes very little sense. And yet the film was good enough to convince Warner Bros to purchase global rights at Cannes, and to receive six AFI Award nominations.

Ben Goldsmith

References

Hall, Sandra (1985) *Critical Business: The New Australian Cinema in Review*, Adelaide: Rigby.